

06.26.07: Fresno Bee Op-Ed - Rail would be a great achievement

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The majestic Golden Gate Bridge is a California icon and a national symbol of opportunity and hope. It's hard to imagine San Francisco Bay without this great landmark. But few know how difficult it was to make the bridge a reality.

Government approval took more than a decade because the proposal was faced with mammoth challenges of political will, financial burden and engineering obstacles. Nevertheless, in the midst of the Great Depression, wise voters approved a \$35 million bond act for its construction. The rest is history.

Today, some 70 years after the bridge was completed, we have yet another opportunity to better our transportation system -- this time with a world-class, high-speed rail system. Aesthetically, it won't match the grandeur of the Golden Gate Bridge, but its potential to benefit all of California is far greater.

Unfortunately, in an affirmation that history does indeed repeat itself, the proposal for such a system has been stymied by numerous political and financial barriers. In 1990, Assembly Member Jim Costa and I introduced companion legislation authorizing the California High-Speed Rail Authority. We envisioned then the dire scenario of overcrowded freeways worsening across this state. Yet despite the need for serious and immediate alternatives, the concept has been stalled.

Traffic congestion levels are expected to double within the next 35 years. The Central Valley's Highway 99 and the I-5 freeway will become as congested as the Los Angeles and Bay Area freeways. With that congestion comes more smog, adding to the problems of the San Joaquin Valley, which already has some of the worst air pollution and the highest rate of asthma in the state.

And as traffic slows, so does the economy. The transportation of goods and services will grind to a crawl if we continue on our current path. A 21st century transportation network is imperative if we are to continue creating jobs and advancing environmental protections. It's time for California to stop just dreaming big -- it's time to act big.

This would, of course, mean a fundamental change in the way we move about in car-loving California. But such a dramatic shift isn't unprecedented. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature have already helped make California the national leader in decreasing carbon emissions and addressing the climate crisis. What we need now is to lead once again by approving a proposal to finance one of the world's longest -- and this nation's most efficient -- long distance transportation systems.

The high-speed rail project, which would eventually span much of the state, will be a vital step in achieving our ambitious environmental goals by helping dramatically reduce greenhouse gases. When compared with estimated future auto and air travel between Southern and Northern California, high-speed rail will cut carbon dioxide emissions by more than 10 billion pounds per year, and cut oil consumption by 5.2 million barrels annually. Reducing greenhouse gases and decreasing our dependence upon oil is vital in protecting our environment and increasing national security.

Last November, voters passed Proposition 1B, a bond act that provides \$19.9 billion for highway, rail and mass transportation. Now, critical rights of ways need to be purchased, and engineering and environmental reviews need to be completed. It is time for the Legislature and the governor to allocate the \$103 million necessary to get the high-speed rail project under way. So far, the governor's budget allocates only \$5.2 million. The Senate and the Assembly have each proposed to fund just under half of the needed cost for this year. Unfortunately, those proposals miss the mark by a long shot.

California overcame political and financial obstacles 70 years ago to build the Golden Gate Bridge. Though there were many doubts, its beauty and its role in transporting tens of millions of passengers each year easily validates that investment.

Our current leaders must now be as courageous as leaders were then and fight for investment in our future. Are we less willing to think and act larger than our ancestors? Are we reticent to begin such an enormous, long-term task? I say no. As the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once famously said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step."

California became great because of people who weren't afraid to take risks. Because of great leaders, the Golden Gate Bridge represents far more to us than just a construct of concrete and metal. High-speed rail can help us once again push the boundaries of convention and achieve something monumental.